

SEEING THE WORLD: NOW AND THEN, WITHOUT AND WITHIN

THE DISTANCE FROM HOME. By *Daniel Jacobs*. New York: IPBooks, 2019, 230 pp., \$9.95 paperback.

MEMORY'S EYES: A NEW YORK OEDIPUS NOVEL. By *Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau*. New York: IPBooks, 2020, 440 pp., \$25.00 paperback.

But we shall have to follow a roundabout path in order to explain how science sets about restoring to words a part at least of their former magical power.

—FREUD (1890, p. 283)

An author's words, after all, are deeds.

—FREUD, LETTER TO THOMAS MANN, 1935

The writer's joy is the thought that can become an emotion, the emotion that can wholly become a thought.

—THOMAS MANN, *DEATH IN VENICE* (1912)

In the first of my epigraphs, Freud invites the reader to follow him as he unfolds the secrets of psychoanalytic technique or, as it soon enough came to be known, “the talking cure.” The magic of words and their impact on self-knowledge, self-suasion, and self-recovery has proved a steadfast component of most forms of psychotherapy, regardless of provenance. In the second, Freud tells Thomas Mann, a writer he greatly admires, that in writing a novel he has created an honest deed. Finally, Mann, although not responding directly to Freud, captures an essential truth about the psychoanalyst's joy as well.

I chose these three epigraphs because, as I hope to show, they bring us close to the subject of this essay, novels by Daniel Jacobs and Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau. Looking at the books first separately, then together, I hope to convey their pleasures and points of invitation to wander afar, as we hope to do when reading a novel. I will be careful not to reveal too much of their plot lines or major character developments, instead

encouraging you to read them on your own and in your own way. I begin with *The Distance from Home*, primarily for the simple reason of its author's alphabetical precedence, but also because it provides a felicitous segue to *Memory's Eyes*.

Let us begin where Jacobs does, with some lines he has chosen from C. P. Cavafy's *Ithaca*: "Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind. / To arrive there is your ultimate goal. / But do not hurry the voyage at all."

He has selected the middle of a poem that captures the thrall of a particular place. During his ten-year journey home, where all those he loves reside, Odysseus's adventures and misadventures inspire Jacobs and frame his book. Especially relevant for this novel, during his travels Odysseus meets two mothers in Hades, the world of the dead. First is Anticlea, his own mother, whom he learns has died from grief over her loss of him, her son, during this seemingly endless journey. The second is Epikaste (we know her as Jocasta), who died ironically in the wake of finding her son. I highlight this section of *The Odyssey* because mothers are the key characters in this novel. As the novel begins, we see the main protagonist, Hannah, at the funeral of an old friend, reflecting on her mother's death at age nine. These musings carry her to memories of the most interesting journey of her life, twenty-five years earlier, to Nepal. Hannah's mother appears again near the end, and during the journey Hannah confronts her own wishes about motherhood, reminding us of this primordial attachment and its place on the journey of life.

It is interesting to note that Jacobs writes in the voice of a woman. Although other male novelists have done this, with varying degrees of success (Shakespeare being the example par excellence!), one might wonder, fairly or not, why a man would choose to write through the experience of a woman? Can he? May he? Should he? Perhaps psychoanalysts know best that each of us, though delimited by our subjective boundaries, has the great capacity to see the world from multiple vantage points. So, now to Hannah. Jacobs "knows" her in a way that speaks to a great ability to imagine and convey the world as viewed through the lens of this finely wrought female character. While women have written about men and in the voices of male characters from time immemorial, still we sit up and take notice when we encounter a male author writing in the voice of a woman.

Hannah is a curator at the fictional Musée Baudry, perhaps a reference to Paul Baudry, a nineteenth-century French painter famous for his

sumptuous portraits of women, in particular Charlotte Corday and Zenobia. At this small museum, described as “in the shadow of the Frick,” Hannah finds her ambitions stymied. When invited to join several friends who are going to travel halfway round the world to trek in Nepal, she cautiously agrees. Yet before we arrive with Hannah to sample the exotica of Kathmandu, and after we leave this magical spot, the novel offers a wonderfully wrought version of various New York neighborhoods. Still, the power of the novel rests mainly on its luxuriously and lusciously laid out several hundred pages in Nepal. The characters who fill this space are meticulously described. Although Hannah is the fulcrum, she is part of a group that represents various forms of the human condition: single, married, divorced, jilted, faithful, educated, young, old, Western, South Asian, honest, narcissistic, infantile, inappropriate, valiant, idealistic, kind, thoughtless, bigoted, big-hearted, devoted, searching.

One of the most valuable parts of reading *The Distance from Home* is its description of the intertwined nature of the characters’ relationships. They know each other’s foibles, secrets, and strengths, all of which underlie the strong attachment among them. Just when I worried that we were about to slip into homily or cliché, Jacobs pulled me up with a sharp retort, a quick rebuttal, a friendly laugh. These people are familiar and, as with all those around us, I found I liked some more than others, some a lot, and some not at all! But I never lost interest in where they were headed on this long trek, how they would get there, and whom they would meet along the way.

Jacobs easily and smoothly devotes several pages to psychoanalysis, including passing references to Valenstein, Freud, Anna Freud, and perhaps even himself by way of mentioning a paper on supervision in the *Quarterly*. It is noteworthy that the context for these references revolves around Paul, an analyst from the New York Psychoanalytic. Provocatively, Paul is caught in the throes of an erotic countertransference with an acting-out patient who actually travels to find him among his fellow trekkers, in Kathmandu! Not unsurprisingly, Paul tells his tale of woe to several of those around him—he is a convincing narcissist. But a necessary one? Keep this in mind, as you continue reading.

Jacobs’s ability to pull us back from the brink of “too muchness” by putting his characters in familiar psychological contexts allows the reader to take them for who and what they are, even if sometimes grudgingly. Happily, other characters are drawn in ways that allow us to empathize,

sympathize, and, most important, stand in their shoes. Ironically, the two characters who stand out in this regard are almost polar opposites. They are the Nepalese mountain guide Pemba, and Grace, an Australian cultural attaché. (Both, I would imagine, are also polar opposites of many who might read this book.) One is ready to die for his country, yet love across cultures, while the other maintains a haughty disdain for those she considers inferior and even fears, yet among whom she also lives. It is during the last third of the book that Jacobs brings us close to Hannah in a more fully developed manner. She sees the place she finds herself in with stereoscopic vision, coming to know herself from within as well as without, in a new and profound way. She becomes worldly in the deepest sense; she learns much about her world within.

Finally, and perhaps most powerfully for me, is the travel itself. *A Distance from Home* carried me to far-flung places, yet is written from a familiar perspective. Jacobs's descriptions of these places, filled with a detailed sense of place and time, transported me there with him. He writes,

The great square was filled with mountains of fruit rising from uneven paving stones—rough lemons and bead plums, wood apple and watermelon, mango and bananas. . . . Oceans of rice, white and brown, flooded the blue plastic sheets spread beneath them. It would be easy to become lost amidst the rows of spice merchants sitting cross-legged behind their wares. . . . The steady beat of a frame drum and the high pitch of a bamboo flute vied with the hawking shouts of vendors selling saris, along with matching glass and plastic bracelets [p. 20].

And then, later:

Close up, the Bagmati River wasn't what it seemed from a distance. The thick green scum on its banks gave off a fetid odor. Great piles of refuse rose along the shore. Scavengers crawled over them like dung beetles, filling cloth bags with whatever they could use or resell. Beyond the garbage heap lay a holy ground where two corpses wrapped in silk were being cremated. . . . Large stone steps led gaunt and naked worshippers into the river, where they bathed in the ashes of ancestors and were purified [p. 43].

Although his descriptions are unique to a time and place, Jacobs encourages us to find the universal truths a successful novel brings its readers, regardless of geography, topography, clime, and culture.

Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau has written a quite different book. She starts *Memory's Eyes: A New York Oedipus Novel* with the very beginning of storytelling itself, as she tells the reader before her tale begins, "This is a story older than time. A Greek master told it first." And just before we turn to page 1, she says, "And soon you'll find yourself puzzling over a mystery. It's fun, and it's dark. This is the only warning you'll receive."

And, no surprise! her prologue is titled "Sophocles": "Oedipus Rex," she writes, "is essentially a mystery play filled with secrets, intrigue, murder, and definitely mayhem." And these are precisely the elements I found throughout this novel, foreshadowed for the reader in a rather intriguing note from the author intimating that all the primary characters in the myth, and there are many, "play a role in this novel."

Its narrator, Antje, the daughter of Eddie, takes us on her own personal journey. Her naiveté slowly transforms from curiosity and conjecture to, ultimately, conviction. Although Antje sees the world initially through the prism of childhood, her great capacity for insight and observation allows her to present the characters we meet as fully developed and finely detailed. Her descriptions are reliable, even as her storyline is not. And that is what always makes a mystery gripping: who is telling the truth, what must we remember, why is she dead, when did this happen—where, essentially, does the answer lie?

Another important quality of Antje/Ann is that she is a world traveler with the sophistication and sensibilities that come from such adventure. In other words, although the universe was a much smaller place twenty-five hundred years ago, much like Oedipus and those near to him, Eddie, Joyce, Larry, Antje, Paul, Issy, Theo, Teresa, Hayden, and many others travel far and wide throughout this novel. In Cologne, Munich, New York, Switzerland, Rome, Florence, Dallas, San Francisco—small towns, large cities, funeral parlors, analyst's offices, libraries, cafés—the characters are almost always on the move. That proves to be inviting rather than disorienting; we want to travel with them to see what they've just seen, to drink and eat the meals they have consumed. An ironic pleasure of reading the myth of Oedipus, all those years ago, is that it brings us close to people who are at "home" in domestic situations. And that is how it remains in *Memory's Eyes*.

Although Schmidt-Hellerau has not written an epistolary novel, Ann is often writing to her beloved Hayden, as she invites him to join in her experiences. Part One is titled "How It All Started: A Family Romance" and that

motif appears again at the end when Ann tells us, “The family romance I had written down for Hayden didn’t exchange my parents, I just made up the stories of their lives” (p. 338). The central concept of the “family romance” is not simply a piece of psychoanalytic jargon; it is a shared and universal component of childhood. What must we do to fulfill and then transform what confronts us as an imperative when young: murder, marry, make babies? Schmidt-Hellerau has written a novel in response to this demand and has told it, as does Sophocles, from many angles: love, sex, rivalry, envy, retribution, birth, and death. Thus the reader is reminded that this ancient tale grips us, no matter the epoch in which it is placed.

Memory’s Eyes is definitely of this age; its subtitle, *A New York Oedipus Novel*, never lets us forget that. For starters, when we first meet Joyce, she is an actress performing on Broadway in the role of Jocasta. Why not? But she also plays Cordelia(!) in *King Lear* and many other roles before she dies. Here is an especially lyrical paragraph describing Antje’s memories about her granny, and then what Eddie does just after her death, that is as old and as current as the world and life itself:

When I was little and asked my father about my granny, and he wouldn’t tell me, I sometimes thought of her as a white bird: she just flew away one beautiful summer day, through the open window straight towards the shining sun, merrily flapped her wings, freely zipped out and lightly floated through the warm air that surged from Manhattan’s street canyons heated by its tall buildings’ summer walls, drifting up from deep down the chimney shafts, a breeze that carried her upwards, upwards, where she at first was hovering for a moment in the skies around 5th Avenue and Central Park, then smoothly hovering over the Dakota, curiously looking from above at all the places she had gazed at so often from her living room, and then . . . [pp. 138–139].

And later:

When he dispersed her ashes from the Staten Island Ferry into the Upper New York Bay—as she has always wished for, should she ever die—they might very well have come together, she and he, or simply the dust they were and would always be—so there she was flying, I imagined, white and light like a short piece of thread in the wind, like a lingering thought, or like the strange bird that carries the soul of ancient tragedies to the all-embracing horizon of life in the middle of New York, in the middle of our hearts [pp. 139–140].

But also significant is Schmidt-Hellerau's knowledge of how to have fun—as we go to the movies, hang out on museum steps, read other novels, we never forget in which world we are, in which culture(s) we are living. She inserts the names of so many of our high/low cultural icons (Woody Allen, Fellini, Calvino, Bogart, Beckett, Miller, Chekhov, Shakespeare, to name a few) that we can forget about dreary Eddie, smug Larry, flighty Joyce, all-knowing Teresa, obnoxious Paul, and all those other characters who dominate; in other words, she invites us not to take ourselves too seriously.

The reader learns that Ann is a psychoanalytic candidate in analysis with Dr. Shepherd. In the myth, we recognize that without the shepherd there would be no oedipal myth, no lie, no truth. Thus, Schmidt-Hellerau tells us a tale within a tale within a tale, within—very much like the analytic endeavor itself. Although the context is that of the main character's life, the novel goes well beyond that storyline. Its pages are peopled with characters exploring many interesting things in many different places. For example, Paul, the analyst, is wildly indiscreet and shamelessly self-serving. His acting out occurs in a convoluted continuum with several other characters in the novel and, as in the myth, he is severely punished for his sins. But Paul must be included since Polyneices, the traitor, will not be still. And just like Paul (in both novels!), Polyneices shames his family, his country (read profession), and himself. And, like Jacobs, Schmidt-Hellerau ensconces this subplot in the novel such that it demands attention while keeping all the other interesting characters in play.

Here lies the strength and beauty of the novel. It is not simply a retelling of a familiar story; rather, it is an original recasting of character, time, and place. Schmidt-Hellerau tells the oedipal tale of love between father and daughter, Eddie and Antje. And I spoil nothing by telling you—for how could it not be so?—that Eddie will go blind and die, and that Teresa will come along and impressively guide Antje to greater truths. And that is because Schmidt-Hellerau surprises, delights, taunts, worries, saddens, and moves the reader in fundamental yet original ways. And this is perhaps the essence of what keeps our attention in the novel, much as it does in Sophocles' play.

This, then, is the story: the eternal interaction between the mundane and the profound, the daily and the universal: parents and children, loyalty and betrayal, pleasure and pain, survival and death. When we get beneath the surface, the implicit intrigue, and dig deeper, the lies that are

exposed allow the truth and an ensuing psychological awareness to flower.

Finally, a small but irresistible treat comes at the very end, when we are greeted by Homer, the greatest storyteller of all.

Many book essays are organized around common nonfiction themes, subjects, historical eras, scientific discoveries that allow the reviewer to have the books “speak to one another,” in assent or contradiction. Comparing novels of different authors might not seem immediately rewarding, especially when their storylines and styles are distinct. However, it can be pleasurable to spend time pondering how two novels can affect the reader in different ways, yet with interesting and unexpected parallels. To that end, it is perhaps worth a minute to think of the novelist’s most basic resource—as Mark Twain said, to “write what you know.” As I hope to have shown, even briefly, both our authors did just that, yet not only that. Both Schmidt-Hellerau and Jacobs—our analytic colleagues after all—have written unmistakably from their sophisticated vantage points as doctors of the mind.

They have created characters not only out of myths but out of their self-and-other awareness such that we, their readers, are familiar with them as well. However, and this is where art makes its case, our two authors’ unique combinations and constructions come from other, less clearly acknowledged places.

Since I am writing this for a psychoanalytic journal, it seems fair to remember that novel writing, no matter according to whose dictates, is an open-ended, complex, and truth-seeking process. That also describes effective psychoanalytic therapy. Dan Jacobs and Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau have written books that neither explore overlapping or interconnected themes, nor tell stories that intersect through storyline, style, or character. Nonetheless, both are psychoanalysts (in the same institute!), both are major contributors to the analytic literature, and both love to teach and treat. The talents implicit in each of these life endeavors are brought to bear in their moving, lyrical, utterly enjoyable novels. So perhaps the link is just that: psychoanalysts writing fiction, both in their own way. Their novels reflect life across broad vistas of the “real” world while nonetheless illuminating the depths and truths of other, internal realities. Their styles, subjects, and stories (in other words, the elements of the novel), are especially effective because these books are written by authors who spend most of

their time peering at and valuing matters beyond and below the surface of human experience. Interesting literature does just that too.

REFERENCES

- FREUD, S. (1890). Psychical (or mental) treatment. *Standard Edition* 7:283–302.
- FREUD, S. (1935). Letter from Sigmund Freud to Thomas Mann, June 1935.
In *Letters of Sigmund Freud, 1873–1939*, ed. E.L. Freud. London:
Hogarth Press, 1970, p. 426.
- MANN, T. (1912). Death in Venice. In *Death in Venice and Other Stories*,
transl. D. Luke. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

1185 Park Avenue, #1L
New York, NY 10128
Email: Barbara.stimmel@mssm.edu